

# **Varying Formats for Two-Year-College Honors Seminars**

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**H**onors programs at two-year colleges vary substantially in scope, size, and structure depending on an individual college's mission, campus culture, and budget. One common curricular feature, however, is the honors seminar. Scholarly resources for creating honors seminars at two-year colleges include Luke Vassiliou's 2008 essay "Learning by Leading and Leading by Teaching," which provides an excellent discussion of constructing a two-seminar sequence in which the first seminar prepares the students to run a completely student-led second seminar (111). Directors wishing to develop seminars can also turn to the brief discussion of introductory interdisciplinary classes in two-year-college honors programs in Theresa A. James's *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges* (28–29). Additionally, they can adapt information from considerations of four-year college honors seminars such as Anne Marie Merline's discussion of guidelines for communication skills (81).

and Samuel Schuman's description of courses that are often interdisciplinary, sometimes team-taught, and "frequently . . . conducted on some variant of the graduate seminar model" (33–34).

Overall, however, little information is available on creating honors seminars at two-year schools. Our essay responds to this deficit by considering two seminar formats: the three-credit interdisciplinary courses offered at Mt. San Jacinto College and the four-credit, team-taught interdisciplinary seminars at Lane Community College. These formats address needs specific to the two-year-college honors population, which largely comprises returning students, veterans, parents, and economically disadvantaged members of the community who often are considering transfer to a four-year school and in many cases plan to attend graduate school. The seminar formats presented here were designed to support the students' success at transfer institutions by addressing several obstacles they face, including unfamiliarity with academic research, limited exposure to university campuses and resources, lack of confidence, and a limited sense of themselves as scholars.

## **HONORS SEMINARS AT MT. SAN JACINTO COLLEGE**

Mt. San Jacinto College (MSJC) is a moderate-sized community college founded in 1963 and located in Riverside County, California. MSJC has two large campuses, the original campus in San Jacinto and a second in Menifee, as well as two smaller satellite centers. Altogether the district serves approximately 18,000 students (unduplicated headcount) with just over 10,000 FTES (full-time-equivalent students). The MSJC Honors Enrichment Program is a district-wide program with a student population between 250 and 400 depending on the semester. Currently the program has two faculty Co-Directors, one housed on each campus. The program requires an honors seminar as the capstone honors course for those students wishing to complete the program. The seminar, Honors Studies, is an interdisciplinary course that focuses on a different topic each time it is offered. Faculty from across the college are invited to make presentations in the seminar on some aspect of the identified topic. Three different seminars can be offered to meet this requirement: Honors Studies: Humanities; Honors Studies: Social Sciences; and Honors Studies: Sciences.

The majority of honors classes at MSJC are "stacked" classes, which means that the honors section is limited exclusively to honors students (capped at five students) but is stacked on top of a regular section of the same class. For example, the honors section of Anthropology 101 is connected to

a regular section, and the honors students are expected to complete all of the assigned work for the regular section and also to meet outside of class with the instructor individually or as a group and to work on enrichment assignments. Students wishing to complete the program must complete a total of five classes for a minimum of fifteen units. Four of the classes must be in at least three different academic disciplines. The fifth class, the only required class, is the seminar.

The honors seminars at MSJC are full-semester, three-credit courses capped at eighteen students and open only to students who have been accepted into the Honors Enrichment Program. Typically one section of the course is offered at each campus; the day and time of the seminar changes from semester to semester to help students fit the class into their schedule. Ideally students take the seminar as their last honors class, but they can register for the class during any semester.

The class meets one day a week for three hours. Each semester, the class has a different topic and typically a different instructor of record. The instructor invites professors from different disciplines to make a presentation on how the selected topic can be studied or related to their particular discipline, allowing students to see how topics and problems are approached in an interdisciplinary context. The following are examples of past seminar topics:

- Legends
- Science Fiction, Science Fact
- The Legacy of Charles Darwin
- Power and Violence
- Victims of War
- Food as Culture
- Film and Culture
- Sexuality and Society
- Mental Illness among Adolescents
- Zombies
- Colonialism and Imperialism.

The instructor of record is almost always from a discipline that would most likely focus on the topic, e.g., a history teacher for Colonialism and Imperialism and an English teacher for Science Fiction, Science Fact.

The invited presenters often have considerable latitude in selecting their take on the topic although the instructor of record often provides advice or direction. Presentations run the gamut. For Legends, an anthropology professor looked at the legend of Sasquatch but used it as a way to incorporate and apply the scientific method. Very often English professors assign a short novel to discuss; in the seminar on the Legacy of Charles Darwin, for instance, an English professor had the students discuss Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, and in Sexuality and Society the faculty and students discussed Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

The opportunity for visiting presenters to select material beyond what they typically teach is a significant benefit. Because MSJC is a two-year college, most of the courses we offer are introductory or survey courses. The chance to present material that faculty rarely get to discuss helps provide much needed diversity in their research and teaching. MSJC also partners with a local museum in offering a lecture series to the public based on the seminar theme and invites four or five of the presenters to reprise their presentations for this series.

The visiting presenters often suggest readings that the students are directed to read before class (often available online or on reserve in the library) so that they are prepared for the discussion. Typically, any presentation by a visitor takes no more than an hour and a half, with the remaining time spent as discussion with both the instructor of record and the visiting presenter acting as moderators.

Although the instructor of record is responsible for determining how the students will be assessed and graded for the class, the Honors Committee expects that a significant portion of the overall grade will be based on a final project, which is typically presented as both an extensive paper (usually involving research) and an oral presentation. The final project, usually determined by the student in collaboration with the instructor of record, focuses on some aspect of the seminar topic. Often the student's interest is sparked by one of the visiting professors, who can act as another source of help for the student.

In California, the honors programs at many colleges have organized into a consortium called the Honors Transfer Council of California (HTCC). The HTCC has a number of components in its mission, one of which is to challenge and prepare students for the rigors of upper-division and graduate work. The consortium organizes a research conference every spring, held at University of California, Irvine. The Honors Enrichment Program at MSJC

encourages students who are taking the seminar to submit a presentation to the conference, which provides an incentive for the instructor of record to include both the paper and the presentation for the final project. MSJC students have an excellent record of being accepted to present at the conference and of having their papers well-received by the audience. For many of our students, this research conference is the first time they have been on a university campus and often helps solidify their desire to transfer to a major university.

While the final project typically makes up a large portion of the student's grade, a number of other assignments encourage critical thinking and the development of scholarly skills. Students are often required to complete a number of response papers in reaction to readings or visitors' presentations. In preparation for the extensive final research project, students typically complete a number of intermediate assignments, including a project proposal, an outline, and an annotated bibliography of a subset of the references that are likely to be used. In this way, students can learn that high-quality research papers are not completed at the last moment, and the instructor can make sure that the student is on track, help if the student is having difficulty, and be more confident in the overall quality of the work. The instructor's oversight during this process also helps students once they transfer. Upper-division students at a four-year college or university rarely get individual guidance in the various stages of writing research papers. Since many of our honors students are returning students, veterans, or students who underperformed in high school, helping them become academically adept is an important focus of the seminar and of all our honors courses.

Class participation also factors significantly into the class grade. Discussion is a major component of visiting presentations, and the instructor of record keeps track of student participation in terms of both frequency and quality, incorporate it into the final grade. Some students who are engaged with the material and have good ideas, though, are too shy to communicate in class. While instructors attempt to coax such students into developing the important skill of class discussion, many include an online venue for discussion. MSJC uses the Blackboard Course Management System, so incorporating an online discussion forum with due dates is convenient, and all students are familiar with that structure from other classes.

During the past seven years, faculty have occasionally been able to team-teach the seminar, with two professors serving as instructors of record for the class. Both professors attend every class session, participate in grading the students, and share responsibility for the final grades. Since both professors are

paid as if they were the sole instructor of record, this option is expensive, and recent economic troubles required the Honors Enrichment Program to cease offering it, but, when the seminar does run as a team-taught class, the benefits are significant to both the students and instructors. The students get to see the different perspectives that the instructors bring to the subject, including occasions when they might disagree and consequently model appropriate academic discourse for expressing difference of opinion. Team teaching also benefits the instructors by giving them insight into the different teaching styles of their colleagues and having the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other.

The honors seminar at MSJC offers a number of benefits to the students. Since the class is capped at eighteen students and is populated entirely by honors students, the seminar participants engage a topic at a higher academic level than they typically do in their other classes. Since all the other honors classes are stacked on top of regular classes, a student might have taken most of his or her honors sections with at most one other honors student. This class allows students in the program the opportunity to experience the high level discussion that they desire and in which they will be expected to participate when they transfer to a four-year college or university.

Another significant benefit of the honors seminars at MSJC is that students have an opportunity to see how a particular topic can be studied from a variety of perspectives. Very often students become so focused on their major that they use only that academic lens to examine a wide array of issues. The seminar shows them that multiple perspectives can be applied to one topic and that the disparate perspectives allow students and faculty to make significant observations.

Another benefit for the student is that, given the small size of the seminar, the instructor of record often creates a much stronger bond with them than with students in larger, non-honors classes. This relationship allows students to feel more comfortable with the professor and creates opportunities for the professor to write better letters of recommendation and to provide more detailed advice about their future academic careers.

Although the Honors Seminar is meant to be the capstone course, the reality is that students take the course at different times. For those students who take the seminar in the beginning or middle of their time at MSJC, the seminar is an opportunity to try out the visiting presenters to see if they might be interested in taking classes from them in the future. A number of students who have gone against the recommendation to leave the seminar for last have

said how useful it was for them in choosing future classes, allowing them to identify faculty with whom they wished to form a relationship in order to collect better letters of recommendation and obtain more directed advice.

The honors seminar is not only a benefit for professors as well as students. Visiting instructors often comment on how much they appreciated the opportunity to research their topic in greater depth than they do for their own classes; such research can then be used in lectures for their regular, discipline-specific courses. An additional benefit to the instructor of record is the opportunity to hear approximately a dozen colleagues presenting information on the topic from their disciplinary perspectives; they learn information and approaches to teaching that they can take back to their other classes.

The Honors Studies courses at MSJC are exciting and dynamic classes, providing advancement of intellectual curiosity for not only the students but also the faculty. Through the seminar, students are able to gain skills that help them progress through their academic careers, and they get to see a wide array of professional, academic behaviors modeled by their professors. The professors get to do research and make presentations on new topics and to interact with other faculty and students in an atmosphere that is rare at the community college level. The seminar helps to build better-prepared students and a more involved and engaged faculty.

## **HONORS SEMINARS AT LANE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, is an open-enrollment college serving 12,312 FTE students in 2014–2015 and with a student headcount of more than 33,000 in the fall of 2014. Students come from an approximately 5,000-square-mile district. Its main transfer schools are the University of Oregon, also in Eugene, and Oregon State University 45 minutes away in Corvallis. Smaller numbers of students transfer to Portland State University and Oregon Health Sciences University, both in Portland, and to Southern Oregon University in Ashland. The honors program, founded in 2011, includes a seminar sequence to support the goal of making sure students are well-prepared to undertake upper-division honors research at four-year schools. To this end, the seminar sequence has three emphases: hone students' research skills, increase their ability to think critically about academic research, and build their confidence level about being active members in the larger academic community of scholars.

The seminar sequence comprises two courses: Honors Invitation to Inquiry Seminar and Honors Capstone Seminar, each of which is a four-credit,

one-term class. While other honors classes are open to any student who has met the prerequisites and is willing to undertake honors-level work, the seminars are open only to students in the honors program and are required for completion of the program. The seminars offer a variation of the interdisciplinary and team-taught seminars described by Theresa A. James in *A Handbook For Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges* in that they are team-taught not by pairing faculty in two classes but by having two faculty members from different disciplines teach each seminar together (28–29). Thus far, English and science faculty have taught the seminars.

Invitation to Inquiry is the prerequisite for the Honors Capstone Seminar. Ideally, students take the first seminar during their second term so that it can inform their work in all of their courses and not just in the Capstone Seminar. The course reviews the academic research process from an interdisciplinary perspective because two-year college students are often still deciding which major to pursue when they transfer to a four-year school. Students have to pass College Composition with a B or higher to enroll in the course, assuring that they have had some exposure to college-level research. The seminar builds on that knowledge by focusing on thinking critically about the research process itself. Students read an excerpt from Stephen Brookfield's *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question Their Assumptions* and then consider a series of questions throughout the term: What assumptions do the students have about scholarly research? What assumptions has the program made in building the seminar? In doing their research, what assumptions do they find other scholars making? The instructors ask them to test these assumptions to see if they hold up.

As students pursue their own line of inquiry, the seminar expands their knowledge of research resources. For instance, the class works closely with the honors librarian and has library research workshops held in class. The instructors also take the students to the University of Oregon's Special Collections Library for a workshop on archival research. Many two-year-college honors students are returning students who have been out of school for several years or did not complete high school but instead earned a GED. Their familiarity with scholarly research is often limited to what they learned in Invitation to Inquiry, and most of them have never explored the resources available to them through a university library.

A variety of guest speakers participate in the class throughout the term as well. For instance, a panel of faculty from different disciplines discuss what constitutes valid evidence in their respective fields. This panel pairs well with

the library workshops led by the honors librarian about conducting research in different disciplines. It also develops students' awareness of different fields, a significant benefit since they are often still deciding on a major and do not understand the differences between disciplines beyond a general sense of their different subject matters. Toward the end of the term, a guest speaker addresses how cultural paradigms influence one's assumptions. This lecture connects back to the Brookfield excerpt's discussion of paradigmatic assumptions the students read at the beginning of the term. It also broadens the students' perspective on scholarly research so that they can begin bridging the gap between an introductory understanding suitable for lower-division classes and a more complex understanding appropriate for upper-division courses.

The seminar also involves the students in local academic events in order to increase their familiarity with these opportunities and their confidence about participating in them. For example, the UNESCO chair from the University of Oregon, Steven D. Shankman, spoke with the students about a series of events taking place in Eugene addressing the death penalty. The students attended several of these events, including an international conference at the University of Oregon's law school, the *Dead Man Walking* opera, an artist's talk, and a lecture series.

At the end of the term, the students do not produce a research paper so that they focus less on completing a required final assignment and focus more on thinking critically about academic research. To this end, they instead write a four-to-six page, thesis-driven, reflective essay about the assumptions they held, encountered, and tested during the term. The essay allows them to recognize how much they have learned and increases both their critical thinking and their confidence about moving on to upper-division classes at a university.

Students also participate in a two-hour, student-led roundtable discussion in which they interrogate the concept of academic research, address the assumptions they tested during the quarter, and use their own research projects as evidence for the claims they make. Although students engage in discussion throughout the term and instructors describe the intensive discussions that can take place in upper-division seminars, actually participating in the roundtable discussion allows them to experience a version of these discussions first-hand. Additionally, the experience emphasizes their identity as scholars engaging in an academic event, an identity they rarely have when beginning the seminar and one that will help them be successful when they transfer.

The Capstone Seminar runs each spring and builds on the work done in the Inquiry seminar but with a focus on group research projects rather than individual ones. The students decide as a class on the related topics they want to research during the term. Each student pitches two topics and the class evaluates them. Once the final topics are chosen, students form research groups for each topic. Past topics have included health care options for two-year-college students, challenges and support services for single-parent students, the gender gap in STEM classes and professions, Take Back the Tap, and the impact of food choices on a person's carbon footprint. Although students have opportunities for group work in other classes, this seminar places much more responsibility on the students in order to hone the skills they will need for collaborative work at their transfer institutions.

During the term, each group prepares a proposal, an annotated bibliography, and a progress report. In addition to choosing their topics, groups also determine the main audience for their research and the best way to present their research based on that audience. Presentation formats have included posters, PowerPoint presentations, panels, and papers.

While the students are conducting their research, they also explore research opportunities at four-year schools in the area. They attend the University of Oregon's Undergraduate Research Fair and discuss this experience in class. The instructors also take them to Oregon State University's Honors College Research Fair so that they can examine work by other honors students. These experiences increase the students' comfort level on university campuses. Seeing that their research parallels what other honors students are doing at four-year schools also builds their confidence.

As with the Inquiry seminar, it is important to provide specific types of support to the groups as they conduct their research. The honors librarian leads workshops on finding sources specific to their projects and on gathering evidence. The online Moodle site contains a variety of documents on conducting interviews and public speaking. Faculty give presentations to the class about how best to organize hard copies of materials and electronic resources during the research process.

The seminar concludes with a two-hour symposium organized by the students. They are responsible for the format of the symposium, again making their decisions based on the relevant audiences for their work and the best ways to present their research findings. For instance, in the first year the students invited experts in the field to participate on panels. The students also formed panels and used their research findings to question the experts. In

the second year's symposium, the students each presented a paper or PowerPoint presentation and invited a keynote speaker. The symposium event also includes information tables and a reception following the presentations. The Lane Honors Program is relatively new and has only had four Capstone Seminars so far, but attendance has averaged around fifty people per symposium, and the audience has comprised students, faculty, and members of the community. After the symposium, students realize they are capable not only of conducting group research but of presenting their findings to a relevant audience in an academic setting. They leave with an awareness of their ability to continue this work as juniors and seniors at a university.

The Inquiry and Capstone seminar model has worked well for Lane. Students develop research skills comparable to those necessary for upper-division honors coursework. They also increase their ability in Lane's five Core Learning Outcomes: think critically, communicate effectively, engage diverse ideas, create solutions, and apply learning. Additionally, students demonstrate increased confidence in their abilities and increased acceptance of their own inclusion in a community of scholars. Students' anecdotal feedback acknowledges the positive impact the seminars have on their work in other classes and in classes once they transfer.

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR BUILDING TWO-YEAR COLLEGE HONORS SEMINARS**

Implementing and designing a seminar requirement in any honors program requires consideration of several elements, and some particular elements need to be considered at two-year-college programs. These elements include support from the campus community, selection of faculty to teach the seminars, and ways to raise student awareness of the seminars.

Administrative support is a significant issue. In the current economic climate, many community colleges are increasing enrollment in their courses and cancelling courses that are under-enrolled. Due to financial aid restrictions, students are also limited in the number of electives they can take. Because the honors seminars are often capped at lower enrollments than other classes (both MSJC and LCC cap their seminars at eighteen students), the college must be willing to offer them even though they are more costly. Since the seminars are required for program completion, a program needs assurances that the administration will allow the classes to run even if they are under-enrolled. Furthermore, since the seminars transfer as electives, the

college needs to get the message out to students, through advisors and faculty, about the importance of taking the seminars in lieu of other electives.

Another consideration is the selection of faculty to teach the seminar. Given the mentoring role of seminar instructors, they have to understand their outside-of-class responsibilities such as extra meetings with students, repeated input on rough drafts of assignments, and, most especially, troubleshooting when obstacles arise. Two-year-college students can face a variety of crises in any given term ranging from childcare to divorce to illnesses to losing their jobs, and the intensity of the honors seminars can make it difficult for students to manage personal challenges and seminar work. Because faculty at two-year colleges typically have heavier teaching loads than faculty at four-year schools, they need to recognize and plan for the responsibilities that come with mentoring honors students in this population.

Finally, scheduling the seminars requires special attention. Two-year-college students may leave school for a term or more if they cannot afford tuition or if personal issues arise. They may also be scheduling classes around their job and also, in many cases, around childcare. Planning ahead to take the seminars is therefore especially important. If the program moves the seminar around in the schedule, changing the day of the week and the time of day it is offered as at MSJC, it is necessary to have an effective way to advertise the class for students in advance of registration. MSJC places all honors students into a BlackBoard shell and then updates them on the topics and scheduling of the upcoming seminars.

At LCC, the Inquiry and Capstone classes are scheduled for consecutive terms. Some students may need to take the seminars during different years, but in general students are more successful if they take the classes back to back. Not only is there less chance that they will run out of elective credits or transfer without taking the second seminar, but the students will also carry over the knowledge, momentum, and confidence from the first seminar to the second. Students are encouraged during Orientation and in the Honors Student Handbook to plan to take the seminars in the winter and spring of their first year in the program, and the program also emails students to remind them of the upcoming seminars. If students leave the program for a time, then additional advising is necessary when they return to make sure that they fit both seminars into their schedules.

## CONCLUSION

Any approach to creating seminars, whether at two-year or four-year schools, will involve some degree of trial and error, and the willingness to evaluate and revise the seminars over time is an important part of the process. The approaches at Mt. San Jacinto College and Lane Community College respond to fairly consistent needs among two-year-college honors-student populations and address obstacles that face these populations; however, they can also be modified to meet more specific needs of students at other programs. Seminars are a valuable part of the honors experience and contribute significantly to students' determination to transfer and their ability to succeed when they do transfer. They are worth the time and investment it takes to make sure that they play a central role in a two-year-college honors program.

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